The Mid-Term:

An Exploration of the Grotesque

The grotesque in literature and art has been a motif for hundreds of years. From Shakespeare, to Victorian novelists like Emily Bronte, to American Southern Gothic writers like Flannery O’Connor, to Hollywood filmmakers like Tim Burton, grotesque characters and landscapes have been presented by writers trying to impart something about humanity. Though grotesque is defined as something comically or repulsively ugly or distorted, it is used by writers to achieve different goals and to impart something specific the author has observed about the world he/she lives in.

In the book, *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson uses the grotesque to comment on humanity’s relationship to truth (see his definition in “The Book of the Grotesque”). He also uses it to comment on the idea of humans communicating with one another and with them.

The filmmaker, Tim Burton, an artist who’s made a career of presenting the grotesque, seems to be using the grotesque for other purposes. In his film, *Big Fish*, Burton offers characters and landscapes that have become grotesque—there’s the witch, members of the town of Spector after its fall from perfection, the physical town of Spector itself, and the members of the circus in the film.

So here’s the mid-term. You are going to watch the film, *Big Fish*, and key in on characters and landscapes that have been made grotesque by Tim Burton (hopefully while you enjoy the rest of this brilliant film as well). While you watch, please take notes on specific moments of the grotesque, and ask yourself the question: Why is Burton presenting these grotesque characters/landscapes? What is he trying to say about his characters/humanity by using the grotesque? **How is it similar to Anderson’s use of the grotesque? How is different?**

The last two questions above are the driving force behind the essay you will be writing during the midterm period for this class. The essay must have all those essay-type parts (introduction, body paragraphs in SQA format, a conclusion). Before the midterm period, you need to look at your notes on *Big Fish*, look at *Winesburg*, *Ohio*, and put your thoughts down into an outline that you will bring to the midterm exam period. The essay will be written in class during that period, but you are allowed to use your notes you take while watching the film, your outline, and your copy of *Winesburg*. When you show up, you should already know exactly what you’re going to say about the use of the grotesque in each work; you should be able to sit right down and kill this essay.

I’ll be using the Essay Writing Rubric we’ve worked with all year, though I will grade grammar and spelling generously, because this will be handwritten in a timed setting.

Please discuss your ideas with your classmates—remember, part of being in a community of thinkers and writers is discussion. Just be sure that the final points you make and the evidence you use is your own.